

Sidelined Ice Breaker Healy Means Loss of U.S. Presence in the Arctic, Coast Guard Official Says



The U.S. Coast Guard Cutter Healy returns to port Sept. 11, 2014. On Aug. 18, 2020, an electrical fire broke out in one of the ship's main propulsion motors, leading the icebreaker to return to port in Seattle for repairs. U.S. COAST GUARD / Petty Officer 3rd Class Jordan Akiyama

ARLINGTON, Va. – The U.S. Coast Guard's Pacific Area commander says she does not know yet how long it will take, or how much it will cost, to repair fire damage to the only U.S. ice breaker patrolling the Arctic.

The temporary loss of the Coast Guard Cutter Healy underscores the need for more ice breaking capability in the waters of the "high latitudes," where "presence equals influence," Vice Adm. Linda Fagan said Aug. 27 at the Surface Navy Association's First Virtual Waterfront Symposium.

The Healy was 60 nautical miles off Seward, Alaska, heading into the second half of its deployment to the Arctic, when an electrical fire broke out in one of the ship's main propulsion motors on Aug. 18. No injuries were reported, and the blaze was extinguished quickly. With the starboard propulsion motor and shaft no longer operational, the Healy returned to its homeport in Seattle for repairs and the Coast Guard canceled further Arctic operations with no indication when they will resume. That leaves just one sea-going U.S. icebreaker, the 44-year-old Polar Star, to serve both the Arctic and Antarctic.

The Healy had completed 103 days in the Arctic, Fagan said,

and was heading back to continue a combined mission of supporting scientific research and patrolling the maritime boundary with Russia in the Far North. The Healy's absence in the Arctic emphasized the Coast Guard's need for the polar security cutter (PSC) program.

The planned 460-foot PSCs will serve as heavy ice breakers as well as performing other Coast Guard missions in the Arctic such as maritime safety and search and rescue operations.

"The United States is an Arctic nation," Fagan said, "and polar capability is the cornerstone of a whole of government approach and strengthens our interoperability with [the Defense Department]." Construction is slated to begin on the first PSC early next year and "we hope to have the first one in the 2024 timeframe," Fagan said, adding "This is a critical investment for the nation."

In her live streamed appearance at the symposium, Fagan praised another Coast Guard investment: small unmanned aerial systems (sUAS). She said the Boeing Insitu ScanEagle drone, deployed with five of the National Security Cutters (NSCs), Stratton, James, Munro, Kimball and Waesche, has been a "key enabler" in the Western Pacific and the High Latitudes. In addition to adding ScanEagles to three more of the 418-foot NSCs, Bertholf, Hamilton and Midgett, Fagan said the Coast Guard is exploring the need for a land-based UAS, on the U.S. southwest border, possibly in partnership with Customs and Border Protection.